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## **Western Republicans aim to chip away at federal holdings**

**Dan Berman, *Land Letter* reporter**

As conservationists try to convince congressional appropriators to restore the Bush administration's proposed funding cuts for land acquisition programs, some Western Republicans are going the other way, pushing legislation that would advance the sale of public lands from the federal portfolio.

Rep. Chris Cannon (R-Utah) introduced a bill (**H.R. 1370**) earlier this month requiring the federal government to conduct an inventory of its approximately 670 million acres of land and identify "surplus and unneeded" parcels for potential sale.

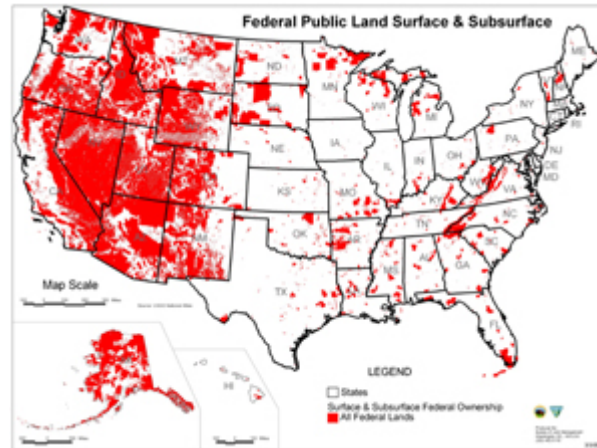
"It's a sad day when one of the largest land owners in the world does not know where the land is, what it's being used for and whether it's being put to its best use," Cannon said. "If you don't know what you have, how can you know what you need to keep and what you can dispose of?"

Along the same lines, Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) also introduced a bill (**H.R. 1235**) this month that would create a system under which any federal land acquisition over 100 acres in Western states would have to be offset by a corresponding sale of land of equal or greater value.

The Bush administration requested \$148 million for land acquisition and state grants for fiscal year 2006, down from \$255 million in FY '05. The biggest cut was the proposed elimination of the National Park Service's stateside matching grants, funded at \$91 million last year.

But Cannon and other members of his all-GOP Congressional Western Caucus say the proposed cuts are not enough, especially considering the administration also proposed slashing Payment in Lieu of Taxes payouts to states and counties by \$26 million for 2006. Appearing on E&ETV's OnPoint earlier this month, Cannon said the high levels of federal land ownership in the Interior West continue to be a problem.

"You look at the West and what you see is that the dominant landlord is the federal government," Cannon said. "And what happens is that in the West, where we have federal land, we tax at a much higher rate of our families and we spend at a much lower rate on our kids and it's all because we have this problem with the federal lands, the federal ownership of lands that we can't tax" (OnPoint, March 17).



The federal government manages one out of every five acres of land in the United States, marked on the map by the red areas. Click on the map for a larger image. Map courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.

The House Resources Committee is planning an oversight hearing on the issue, but it remains to be seen whether Cannon and Flake's legislation will have any legs in Congress.

Tom St. Hilaire, executive director of Americans for Our Heritage and Recreation, is skeptical about the chances for those bills, especially given that the federal government has identified a multibillion-dollar backlog of private inholdings within national parks, wildlife refuges and other federally designated areas.

But the Interior Department seems to be taking a second look at using land acquisitions to protect inholdings, given recent budget requests and its emphasis on cooperative conservation programs that do not necessarily involve federal ownership.

Testifying before the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee earlier this month, Interior Secretary Gale Norton said that out of 6 million acres of inholdings, 4 million acres are already protected, either through easements, zoning or management that is consistent with conservation goals.

Interior presented the panel with a report that stresses land acquisition is simply one tool, and not necessarily the preferred method, for conservation of at-risk areas. The report was written in response to a request from the panel in the fiscal year 2004 spending bill.

Among the findings were that acreage goals are not the best way to determine whether an area is being protected.

"Land acquisition is not a goal in itself, but rather a means to help achieve the departmental objectives," the report states. "Thus, while the acreage target may appear to be the objective, the acreages are actually outputs as agencies pursue the desired outcomes (greater manageability, preservation of areas of national significance, and resource protection), that support departmental objectives, with land acquisition as one of the tools."